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TIMBER WOLF RECOVERY IN WISCONSIN: THE ATTITUDES OF NORTHERN WISCONSIN FARMERS AND LANDOWNERS

by Ed Nelson and Diane Franson

Once there may have been 20,000 wolves roaming Wisconsin (Jackson 1961). Now there are about 20. In an effort to reverse this trend, the Timber Wolf Recovery Team of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources released the draft of a recovery plan that would eventually increase the number of wolves in the state to 80.

The success of this plan depends on the public. People are the critical factor limiting the return of the wolf to Wisconsin. Nearly half of all the wolves in Wisconsin die each year, more than half killed by people. The restoration of the wolf population requires that such killings, both accidental and intentional, be reduced.

In Wisconsin, coyotes can be hunted year-round; however, some hunters cannot tell the difference between a coyote and a wolf. The chances of a wolf being mistaken for a coyote, and thus accidentally shot, increase greatly during the 9-day gun deer season, when a large number of hunters are afield. Therefore, to prevent these mistakes, coyote hunting has been closed in the northern part of the state during the gun deer season.

The recovery plan calls for reducing human intrusion into areas of possible wolf habitat. Specifically, it calls for the gating of new logging roads. Such closure would minimize contacts between wolves and people, but would not restrict use of the roads for logging purposes. The plan also recommends higher penalties for those who kill wolves and calls for increased efforts to apprehend those who kill wolves. A recent change in the state statutes has increased the penalties for killing endangered species.

Will the public support the restoration of wolves in Wisconsin? To find out we conducted a survey of those people important to the success of the recovery plan: northern Wisconsin farmers and non-farm landowners. Areas of potential wolf habitat overlap or are adjacent to farming areas. Farmers in these areas may fear attacks on their livestock by wolves.

Methods and Data Collection

Surveys were sent to 597 people in 6 Wisconsin counties. We targeted these counties because they currently contain or could support

wolves. Clerks of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service drew names for the survey from their county lists. We then mailed each person a 22-page questionnaire that included questions on their attitudes toward wolves and their support for wolf restoration.

Seventy-eight percent of those contacted completed the survey. Although the survey targeted farmers, about one-third of the respondents were non-farm landowners. We have included their answers for comparison. We cannot say, however, that their answers represent the views of all northern Wisconsin landowners.

Attitudes Toward Wolf Restoration

Farmers and non-farmers differed in their support for the restoration of wolves to Wisconsin. Half of the farmers surveyed opposed wolf restoration, 32% supported it, and 18% were undecided (Table 1). Non-farmers expressed stronger support. Nearly half of the non-farmers - 48% - supported restoration, 35% opposed it, and 17% percent were undecided.

Table 1: Attitudes toward the wolf recovery plan.

	Farmers	Non-farmers
Support for the restoration of wolves?		
Oppose	50%	35%
Neutral	18	17
Favor	32	48
Close hunting for coyotes during the gun-deer season?		
Oppose	51	35
Neutral	15	19
Favor	34	46
Discontinue road construction in national forests and other suitable habitat areas?		
Oppose	50	40
Neutral	20	21
Favor	30	39
Pay farmers for any livestock damage due to wolves?		
Oppose	5	11
Neutral	4	15
Favor	91	74
Live trapping and removal of problem wolves?		
Oppose	10	7
Neutral	7	15
Favor	83	78

A majority of both groups opposed the ban on road construction in national forests and other areas of suitable wolf habitat. Almost half of the farmers - 50% - opposed such a ban on construction, 30% supported it, and the rest were undecided. Non-farmers were more supportive: 39% supported it, 40% opposed it, and the rest were undecided. This level of support is surprising since the question did not specify the type of road to be closed. Respondents may have thought of highways rather than newly opened logging trails. Farmers also opposed closing coyote hunting during the deer season. Fifty-one percent opposed this closure, 34% supported it, and 15% were undecided. Non-farmers were more positive: 46% supported the closure, 35% opposed it, and 19% were undecided.

General Attitudes Toward Wolves

Support for the restoration effort may also be colored by more general attitudes toward wolves. The survey explored respondents' fears of wolves, their notions of the relationship of wolves to the deer herd, and their views on the esthetic importance of wolves.

For some, wolves have symbolic value: they represent the wilderness and without them the northwoods are incomplete. Both farmers and non-farmers share this view (Table 2). Forty-six percent of the farmers and 64% of the non-farmers agree that wolves "symbolize the beauty and wonder of nature." Similarly, 48% of the farmers and 62% of the non-farmers agree that it "would be wonderful to hear a wolf howl in the wild."

Some think that the wolf has an image problem: that opposition to the wolf comes from an underlying

fear of wolves. The answers to the survey suggest that neither group fears wolves. Sixty-three percent of the farmers and 64% of the non-farmers say that if they saw a wolf in the woods they would not fear an attack. Only 13% of each group said that they would fear an attack.

Both groups are somewhat more likely to regard the wolf as a threat to livestock. "You can't take your livestock into bed with you to protect them," said one concerned farmer. Thirty-six percent of the farmers and 23% of the non-farmers agree that wolves threaten livestock. Opposition to the wolf may also arise from its appetite for deer. Half of a wolf's diet consists of deer, and the average wolf eats 15 deer in a year. This factor may make them an unwelcome competitor with the other main deer predator: hunters. Only a minority of respondents share this view. Twenty-seven percent of the farmers and 18% of the non-farmers view wolves as a threat to the deer herd. They tend to see harsh winters and poaching as a greater threat to deer. "The biggest threat to the deer population is continuous poaching which goes on quite openly in Bayfield County from what I can see and hear," said one respondent.

Nor do respondents view the wolf as essential in maintaining a balanced deer herd. That role is now played by the state's approximately 650,000 deer hunters. Only 28% of the farmers and 27% of the non-farmers agreed that wolves are necessary for "keeping deer in a proper balance with the environment."

Table 2: General attitudes toward wolves.

	Farmers	Non-farmers
To me, the timber wolf symbolizes the beauty and wonder of nature.		
Disagree	33%	19%
Neutral	21	17
Agree	46	64
I think it would be wonderful to hear the wolf howl in the wild.		
Disagree	34	22
Neutral	18	16
Agree	48	62
If I saw a timber wolf while walking in the woods, I would be afraid it might attack me.		
Disagree	63	64
Neutral	24	23
Agree	13	13
I think wolves are a threat to livestock.		
Disagree	40	39
Neutral	24	38
Agree	36	23
The timber wolf is essential for keeping deer in proper balance with the environment.		
Disagree	54	46
Neutral	18	27
Agree	28	27
Timber wolves hurt deer and the only way to have a lot of deer is to eliminate wolves.		
Disagree	49	56
Neutral	24	26
Agree	27	18

Conclusion

Northern Wisconsin farmers and non-farm landowners are divided on the wisdom of restoring wolves to the northwoods. One-third of the farmers and almost half of the non-farmers support restoration. Slightly less than one-fifth of each group are undecided. Neither group fears wolves and only a minority regard them as a threat to livestock. Both groups are concerned about possible road closures and restrictions on hunting.

Tailoring the proposed plan to meet these concerns will improve its acceptability. In the words of one respondent: "I sincerely believe that the wolf has a place in Wisconsin and man and wolf can survive together if we can develop a plan to meet this goal."

Reference

Jackson, H.T. 1961. Mammals of Wisconsin. Univ. of Wis. Press, Madison, WI. 504 pp.

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